

Archive Package: Loss of the Franchise

Story Sheet: Chinese Canadians Lose the Franchise

The following is one family's story that spans the period before, during, and after the loss of the franchise for Chinese Canadians. For a general background on the Chinese disenfranchisement, see the Historical Backgrounder "Chinese Disenfranchisement – 1872."

Won Cumyow and the Vote

Won Alexander Cumyow, born 1861 in Port Douglas, BC, was the first Chinese born in Canada. His parents ran a store selling clothing and equipment to gold prospectors, and from his years of working in the family store, Won Alexander became a fluent speaker of various First Nations languages, as well as Cantonese and English.

In the early 1870s, Won Alexander's family moved to New Westminster, where they operated several stores. It was around this time, in 1872, that the BC Legislature passed the first law to disqualify Chinese from voting in provincial elections. Over the next several decades, the provincial and federal governments would argue over who should control the voters' lists. During his early 20s, Won Alexander worked as a bookkeeper in his father's stores, until he moved to Victoria in 1884.

In 1888, Won Alexander moved to Vancouver and opened an office as a translator, accountant and real estate broker. In 1889, he married Ye Eva Chan, a young woman who had emigrated from Hong Kong, in an arranged marriage. In 1890, Won Alexander voted for the first time in a federal election, even though he was not permitted to vote provincially. Then in 1895-96, new legislation stripped Chinese of the right to vote in BC, and made the federal voters' lists dependant on who appeared on the provincial voters' lists. This meant that Chinese Canadians lost the federal vote.

His fluency in English, Cantonese, Hakka, and Chinook, helped Won Alexander to secure a job as an interpreter for the Vancouver police court, where he was

employed from 1904 to 1936. Won Alexander developed a strong interest in the law and even articulated at two Vancouver law firms. When Won Alexander's third son, Gordon, applied to law school in 1918, the Law Society of British Columbia quickly passed a new regulation restricting membership to only those who were entitled to vote.

In 1944, Gordon Won Cumyow, and several other prominent Chinese Canadians, signed a petition requesting the right for Chinese Canadians to vote in elections in British Columbia. On May 14, 1947, the federal *Chinese Immigration Act* of 1923 also known as the 'Chinese Exclusion Act', was repealed. In 1949, at the age of 88, Won Alexander Cumyow voted again—making him the only Chinese Canadian to have voted both before and after the disenfranchisement.

Three years later, in 1951, Won Alexander's son Gordon formally entered the legal profession and became the first Notary Public in Canada.

Won Alexander Cumyow died on October 6, 1955, at the age of 94.